

LEADER'S STATEMENT

This is our first Full Council meeting since the Covid-19 pandemic began. Lots has happened, and it would be impossible to mention everything, but I will endeavour to give the headline points and take your questions.

I could not be prouder of this council, and in particular the way our officers have gone above and beyond to stand by our residents during one of the toughest period in the district's history. Despite everything, we've seen the very best of what our council can do.

But it's not just our officers worthy of thanks, I would like to congratulate councillors too for coming together, across the political divide, to join forces with hundreds of volunteers in all corners of our district. I hope this cooperation can continue in the uncertain months ahead, as we play our role in the ongoing Covid-19 recovery and face up to the prospect of big changes to local government in North Yorkshire.

Covid-19

Our key priority, from the outset of the emergency, was to protect lives and livelihoods. I'm immensely proud that we've been able to help do this on behalf of our residents, communities and businesses. And that is what we will need to do during the uncertain times ahead by working together.

Delivering services

Our teams worked around-the-clock to deliver frontline services for our communities. Most of our normal services operated throughout the emergency period, despite increased demand and capacity constraints. We also played a key and significant role in supporting those shielding and in need, working closely with town/parish councils, volunteers and partners such as North Yorkshire County Council.

Business support

We are at forefront of efforts to support the local economy. We've led the way in getting grants out of the door to those who need it - fast. In total, we distributed over £23.5m in grants to more than 2,000 local businesses. That includes £1.1m of discretionary business grants targeted at small and micro businesses unable to access other assistance. A huge amount of work has gone on behind-the-scenes to develop and deliver these grants. Without them, it is certain that many businesses in Ryedale would not have been able to survive.

On top of this, we played a key role in getting businesses back open. We issued over 200 'back to business packs' to help them reopen and operate safely. We also provided particular advice and guidance to hospitality and tourism businesses about how to reopen safely, with 185 businesses registered for Visit England's 'We're Good to Go' industry mark.

Voluntary and community groups

We've also been supporting our important voluntary, community and arts groups. The council created a £40,000 emergency grants fund available to voluntary and community organisations. This provided a lifeline cash injection so they could continue supporting local people during this difficult time. Most recently, we also launched a £5,000 arts grant scheme.

Budget

While all of this is happening, we're of course keeping an eye on costs. The financial impact of COVID-19, in a worst case scenario, is a 20/21 year end overspend of £3m. So far, we have been provided with around £700k in financial support by Government. And

although we are very well placed to meet the extra costs from reserves, we are continuing to lobby for additional funds. Our focus now is on tight financial management, with heads of service working to contain costs and revise their plans for the year.

Local Government Restructure

As if dealing with Covid-19 was not enough, we're now facing another challenge. Government will soon invite councils in North Yorkshire to submit proposals for unitary local government in the county ahead of a devolution deal involving City of York. North Yorkshire County Council has confirmed it will submit a plan to replace our current councils (including Ryedale) with a 'mega unitary' authority. This means that change now seems inevitable.

Covering 8,000km² and encompassing 620,000 people, the county plan would be England's largest ever unitary - and its generated significant public alarm and concern. So reflecting on this mood, the leaders of North Yorkshire's seven district and borough leaders came together, across party lines, to work together on finding the best option for unitary authorities across the county.

KPMG is now working to provide an independent and objective analysis of the options. From a long list of 10, they have identified that an east/west model would deliver much better in terms of finance and democracy, while complying with the Government's indicated "optimal" population threshold of 400,000 residents.

Our plan would create two brand-new councils across North Yorkshire and York, large enough to be efficient into the future, but small enough to keep connected with our communities:

- Ryedale, Scarborough, Selby and York in the east, with a population of 465,375
- Craven, Hambleton, Harrogate and Richmondshire in the west, with a population of 363,297

It is almost certain that change is coming. And if it is, then the seven district and borough leaders - Conservative, Labour and Independent - stand united and determined to work together to get this change right. I would like to ask councillors here in Ryedale too to work together, on a cross-party basis, to develop the very best model for local government in North Yorkshire. It maybe the last, and most important, thing we do.